

PHILOSOPHY BEHIND THE MISSISSIPPI FREE PRESS

Our purpose is to promote education and enlightenment in the principles of democracy to encourage all citizens to participate fully in their government. Until Negroes in Mississippi gain the power of the ballot and until all the people exercise the rights of citizenship, the needs of Mississippi will continue to go unmet; legislation to promote the social welfare and encourage economic growth will continue to be nonexistent. In Mississippi, the fear of economic reprisal and the lack of vital knowledge make even registering to vote an extremely difficult task.

Before any real improvement in social justice takes place, there will have to be a substantial rise in the standard of living. Because the average annual income of rural Negroes is less than \$1,000, they are continually under the economic control of the politicians and landowners. In addition, cotton - the one crop on which the economy is based - is being mechanized, so that increasingly fewer of these low paying jobs are available.

Thus, an essential improvement is encouraging industrial growth and the unionization of existing jobs to raise wages. Mississippi, with its meager industry, has little organized labor now; organizing workers is difficult both because of the lack of knowledge about unions and because of the fears aroused by opposing forces. Legislation to abolish the state's right-to-work law and to encourage unionization is essential.

The Free Press is dedicated to educating and urging the people of Mississippi to assume their rightful roles in the political and economic arenas.¹ In addition, as an institution not connected with any political, labor, or civil rights organizations, the paper is in the unique position of being able to bring together and establish communication between the forces that are - or that could be - working for the common needs of the people of Mississippi.

As the paper grows, it can continue to serve its readers by printing researched articles concerned with improving schools, libraries, health and sanitation, criminal rehabilitation, and other problems of the society. Eventually, the honest coverage of the Free Press may even bring about a greater regard for integrity in the segregationist dailies.

The Free Press has a vast potential - but its primary aim must continue to be to increase the political voice and to raise the living standards of those who are the forgotten people of Mississippi.

¹ The Petal Paper, a liberal monthly with a circulation of 2,150, is directed to readers outside the state.

THE SETTING

The State of Mississippi, located in the South Central United States, is bordered by Tennessee on the north, Arkansas and Louisiana on the west, Alabama on the east, and the Gulf of Mexico on the south.

Mississippi is principally an agricultural state, with cotton the chief crop.

With increased mechanization, there has been some increase in manufacturing. Principal industries are food and food products, pulp-paper and products, and wearing apparel and related products. There are 18,500 retail stores (1958) with total sales of \$1,481.7 million.

The terrain is generally hilly except for the Mississippi Delta, a plain between Vicksburg and Memphis along the Mississippi River, which contains some of the richest cotton land in the world.

At its longest point, Mississippi is 332 miles long; the state has an average breadth of 142 miles. The population, 2,178,141 (1,257,546 white, 920,595 non-white, 1960) is well spread out across the state. There are only eight cities over 25,000: Jackson 145,000; Meridian, 49,000; Biloxi, 44,000; Greenville, 42,000; Hattiesburg, 35,000; Gulfport, 30,000; Vicksburg, 29,000; and Laurel, 28,000.

THE STATE'S NEWSPAPERS

While Mississippi ranks 29th in population, the circulation of its 18 daily newspapers ranks 45th in the nation. Only 12% of the people of Mississippi read a daily newspaper - the lowest percentage in the country.

The dailies that serve the state have a combined circulation of 265,300. The Clarion-Ledger, 52,300, and the Jackson Daily News, 42,500, are published in Jackson by the same company. Other dailies are published in Gulfport, circulation 29,200; Meridian, 22,700; Tupelo, 17,200; Hattiesburg, 16,100; Greenville, 13,200; Vicksburg, 10,600; Columbus, 9,000; Laurel, 12,500; Natchez, 8,000; McComb, 6,200; Greenwood, 5,100; Clarksdale, 5,000; Westpoint, 4,800; Corinth, 4,700; Storkville, 3,600; and Grenada, 2,600.

Two other dailies, the Memphis Commercial Appeal and the New Orleans Times-Picayune, have some circulation of 192,700. The average circulation for weeklies is 2,000, with a few as high as 5,000 and some as small as 400.

HISTORY OF THE FREE PRESS

In 1960 the Hico Publishing Company was founded. In December of 1961 it began publication of the Mississippi Free Press. During its first six months of operation, the paper was managed and edited by untrained students on a volunteer basis. The small amount of capital invested by the incorporators was soon dissipated, and neither circulation nor advertising grew enough to begin to meet the overhead.

At the close of its first six months, I became aware of the Free Press and learned that it was about to cease publication. Seeing the important role such a newspaper could play in Mississippi and believing that I was capable of getting the paper into the position where it could become a permanent institution, I accepted the post of editor. I collected all the funds at my disposal, borrowed money from a friend, and invested the total amount in the corporation.

With these funds the paper was brought to the point where, for the past ten months, it has been self-supporting. Now the paper must expand greatly in order to be able to reach enough people to be effective and to solicit national advertising to provide enough income to increase its size and staff.

At the present time the Free Press has 3,000 paid subscribers and sells approximately 4,000 more copies in bulk for Mississippi distribution, making it the state's largest weekly. The paper has Second Class mailing privileges and the Company is incorporated under Mississippi law.

PLANS FOR EXPANSION

Because of the difficulty of getting subscribers on a one by one basis, we plan to absorb entire membership lists of organizations sympathetic to our aims. The leaders of these groups (unions, Masons, church groups, etc.) are encouraging this plan, but do not have the funds to pay for the subscriptions (\$1.00 a year for 52 issues). The federal regulations pertaining to the Second Class mailing permit require that the subscriptions must be paid for.

Additional funds are also necessary to maintain present and additional staff members; this will permit a reduction in the present killing pace and will contribute to more thorough and meaningful work. There are now three staff members who are paid \$20.00 a week on an irregular basis.

If we are able to acquire \$20,000 to add 20,000 new subscribers in Mississippi, we will be second in size to only two daily newspapers, a circulation large enough to be an effective organ of information and large enough to attract significantly more advertising. Advertising would then be able to pay the greater part of the overhead, and the money which bought the subscriptions could guarantee staff salaries and enable additional expansion. The funds would thus have double effectiveness.

In brief, the past ten months have seen the Free Press prove that it can fulfill an important role in communication and interpretation in Mississippi. The paper has also shown that it can balance its books. In order to reach the numbers it must and in order to establish a base that will be permanent, it must expand significantly. Although Hico will not show dividends in the foreseeable future, it does appear that assistance now will establish the newspaper as a permanent institution with an important effect on Mississippi in the years to come.